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DEX

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PAGES 1

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Joseph Kraft

Mideast: The Triple Illusion

CAIRO — The review of American policy in the Middle East which is now under way needs to concentrate heavily on the reasons for the failure of Henry Kissinger's latest mission. The more so as the air is being poisoned by charges that the Israelis deceived, to use the word of President Anwar Sadat, the Americans and Egyptians.

My impression after brief talks with Dr. Kissinger, Mr. Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is that there was no bad faith. On the contrary, each party deceived itself. There was a triple illusion.

The Israelis began it. The government of Mr. Rabin imagined that Mr. Sadat, because of internal pressures which are severe, was prepared to make a deal independent of his allies on the Eastern front—Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization. It only required, the Israelis supposed, something their previous governments were not prepared to give—a public declaration of willingness to yield specified territory.

So Mr. Rabin—both publicly and privately—said Israel was prepared to yield to Egypt about one-third of occupied Sinai, including its strategic passes and oil fields. In return he sought a declaration of non-belligerency which would neutralize the Egyptian front for several years. His failure explains the nature of the illusion.

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The fact is that Mr. Sadat believes the Arabs are now stronger than the Israelis. His eastern ally, Syria, has become a stable country with a powerful army and, in President Hafez Assad, an astute leader.

President Sadat was, accordingly, not prepared to desert his allies entirely, and he insisted on giving less than a declaration of non-belligerency. But when bargaining began, the Israelis, having started with their final position, had very little to give.

The second illusion was nursed by Dr. Kissinger. He knew that Mr. Sadat would give something less than non-belligerency in return for the passes and oil fields. He relayed that information to the Israeli cabinet and found its members were divided.

Prime Minister Rabin and some others were apparently prepared to go beyond the initial position. Defense Minister Shimon Peres and some others were not. Dr. Kissinger decided that his personal prestige was enough to sweep the field. He even put out a number of stories indicating how his backing would save Mr. Rabin and the doves from Mr. Peres and the hawks.

In his zest for playing personal politics, the Secretary of State—partly because he has been pleased to maintain an amiable nonentity as ambassador in Tel Aviv—totally ignored the larger politics of Israel. He failed to see that the public suspected. Any abandonment of territory would be the first step — the Munich — in a process of coming apart.

When bickering began inside the cabinet, the ministers—as they usually do in democratic countries—fell back on public opinion. The cue from the public determined the whole cabinet not to accept the terms proffered by Dr. Kissinger. His great prestige, far from carrying the day, had played him false.

The Egyptian illusion followed almost automatically. Quite simply President Sadat put his faith in Dr. Kissinger whom he once called a "magician." According to Tahsin Bashir, the President's official spokesman, the Egyptian calculation was as follows:

"If Henry Kissinger, after making elaborate soundings on both sides, was going to undertake another shuttle operation he must have good grounds. He's not the kind of person who would take a risk without being sure of success. So we believed he was going to succeed. That's why President Sadat said the chances of success were 90 per cent."

Despite these illusions, the negotiation almost did succeed. A draft statement of more than a dozen points was drawn up expressing approval by both sides. It included some Israeli withdrawal, some Egyptian move toward non-belligerency, and a commitment—in writing from President Ford—to go on to deal with the problems of Syria and the Palestinians this year. It is hard for me to believe, once the reasons for the recent failure are understood, that the broken negotiation cannot be repaired and brought to a successful conclusion.

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